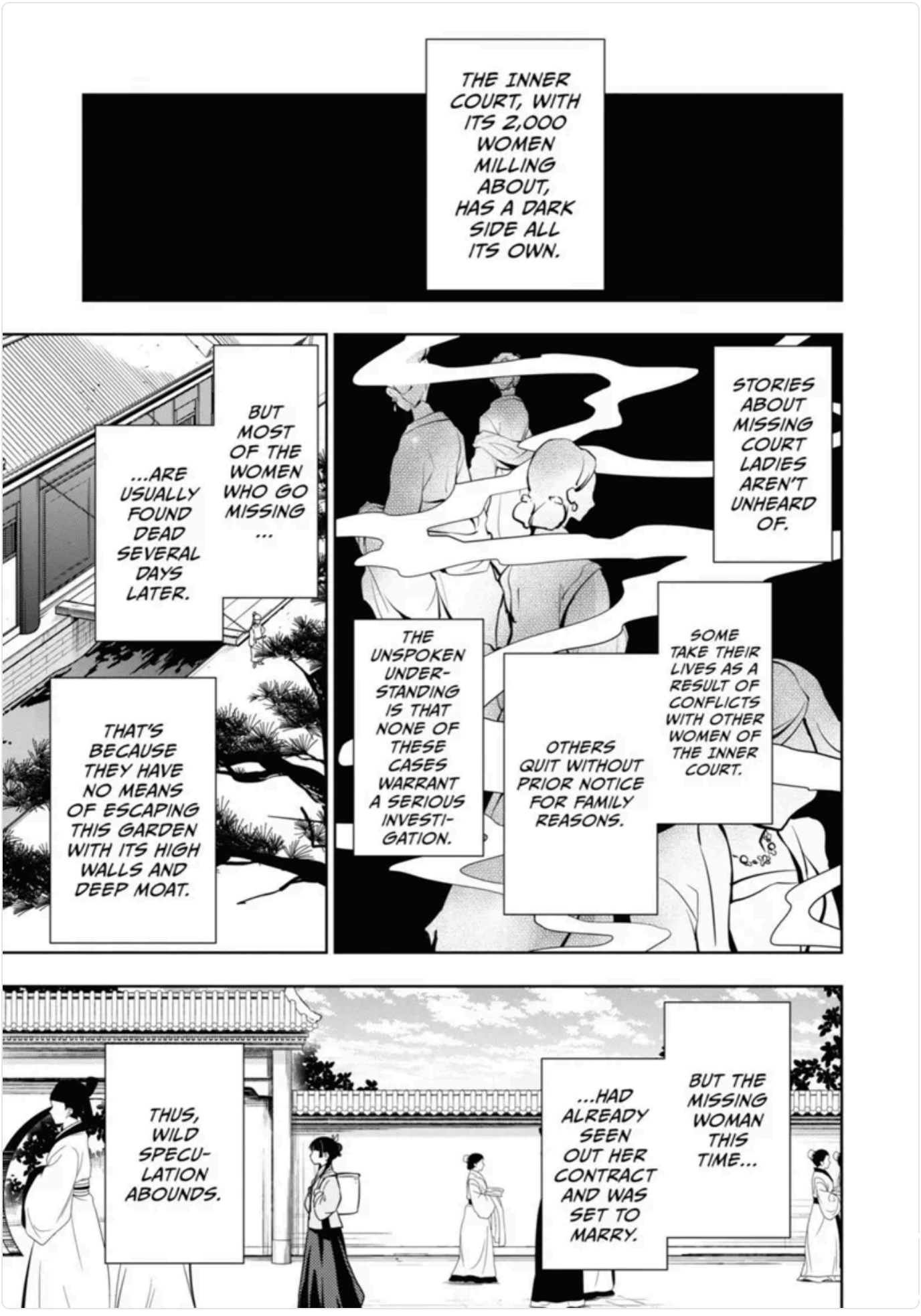
Chapter 44 Corpse Fungus ①

A COURT LADY'S GONE MISSING?
PHYSICIAN
I WONDER WHAT'S BECOME OF HER.
FROM WHAT I HEAR, SHE'D JUST ABOUT COMPLETED HER TERM OF SERVICE AND WAS PLANNING TO LEAVE SINCE SHE'D SAVED UP ENOUGH FOR HER DOWRY.
SO IT SEEMS.
...AND HAD BEEN EXCHANGING LETTERS WITH THE OFFICIAL WHO HAD GIVEN IT TO HER.
...HAD RECEIVED A HAIRPIN AT ONE OF THE GARDEN BANQUETS THE YEAR BEFORE LAST...
I'M TOLD THE MISSING LADY...
...SHE MUST'VE BEEN A VERY CAPABLE WOMAN WHOSE WORK SPOKE FOR ITSELF.
...TO BE ALLOWED OUTSIDE THE INNER COURT AS AN AIDE...
FOR AN AVERAGE LADY OF THE COURT, ONE NOT IN SERVICE TO A HIGH-RANKING CONSORT...


THE INNER COURT, WITH ITS 2,000 WOMEN MILLING ABOUT, HAS A DARK SIDE ALL ITS OWN.
BUT MOST OF THE WOMEN WHO GO MISSING ...
...ARE USUALLY FOUND DEAD SEVERAL DAYS LATER.
THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO MEANS OF ESCAPING THIS GARDEN WITH ITS HIGH WALLS AND DEEP MOAT.
STORIES ABOUT MISSING COURT LADIES AREN'T UNHEARD OF.
SOME TAKE THEIR LIVES AS A RESULT OF CONFLICTS WITH OTHER WOMEN OF THE INNER COURT.
OTHERS QUIT WITHOUT PRIOR NOTICE FOR FAMILY REASONS.
THE UNSPOKEN UNDER-STANDING IS THAT NONE OF THESE CASES WARRANT A SERIOUS INVESTI-GATION.
BUT THE MISSING WOMAN THIS TIME...
...HAD ALREADY SEEN OUT HER CONTRACT AND WAS SET TO MARRY.
THUS, WILD SPECU-LATION ABOUNDS.

WHAT AN EXCEEDINGLY FANCY TEA PARTY.

IT WOULD ROUSE SUSPICION IF SHE STAYED INDOORS ALL THE TIME...
...SO THE CONSORT GETS OUT LIKE THIS EVERY NOW AND THEN TO BE SEEN.
BOTH THE LOCATION AND HER CLOTHES HAVE BEEN CHOSEN WITH CARE...
...SO NO PASSERSBY SHOULD BE ABLE TO TELL SHE'S WITH CHILD AT A GLANCE.
THOSE WHO'D BE LIKELY TO NOTICE SURELY HAVE ALREADY DONE SO BY NOW.
THE QUESTION IS WHETHER OR NOT THEY BEAR HER ANY ILL WILL.
OH! MAO-MAO, YOU'RE BACK.
SHALL WE HEAD INSIDE, THEN?
YES, LET'S.

I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN JINSHI PERIODICALLY MEETS WITH OTHERS BESIDES THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS.
I KNOW MY LADY IS PREGNANT AND THE EMPEROR'S FAVORITE AND ALL...
...BUT HE COMES TO THE JADE PALACE A LITTLE TOO OFTEN, IF YOU ASK ME.
AHA. SOMETHING MUST BE AFOOT.
YOU SENT FOR ME?
YES. HE DID!
RIGHT, THEN.
わくわく EXCITED
わくわく EXCITED
LET'S GO SOME-PLACE ELSE.
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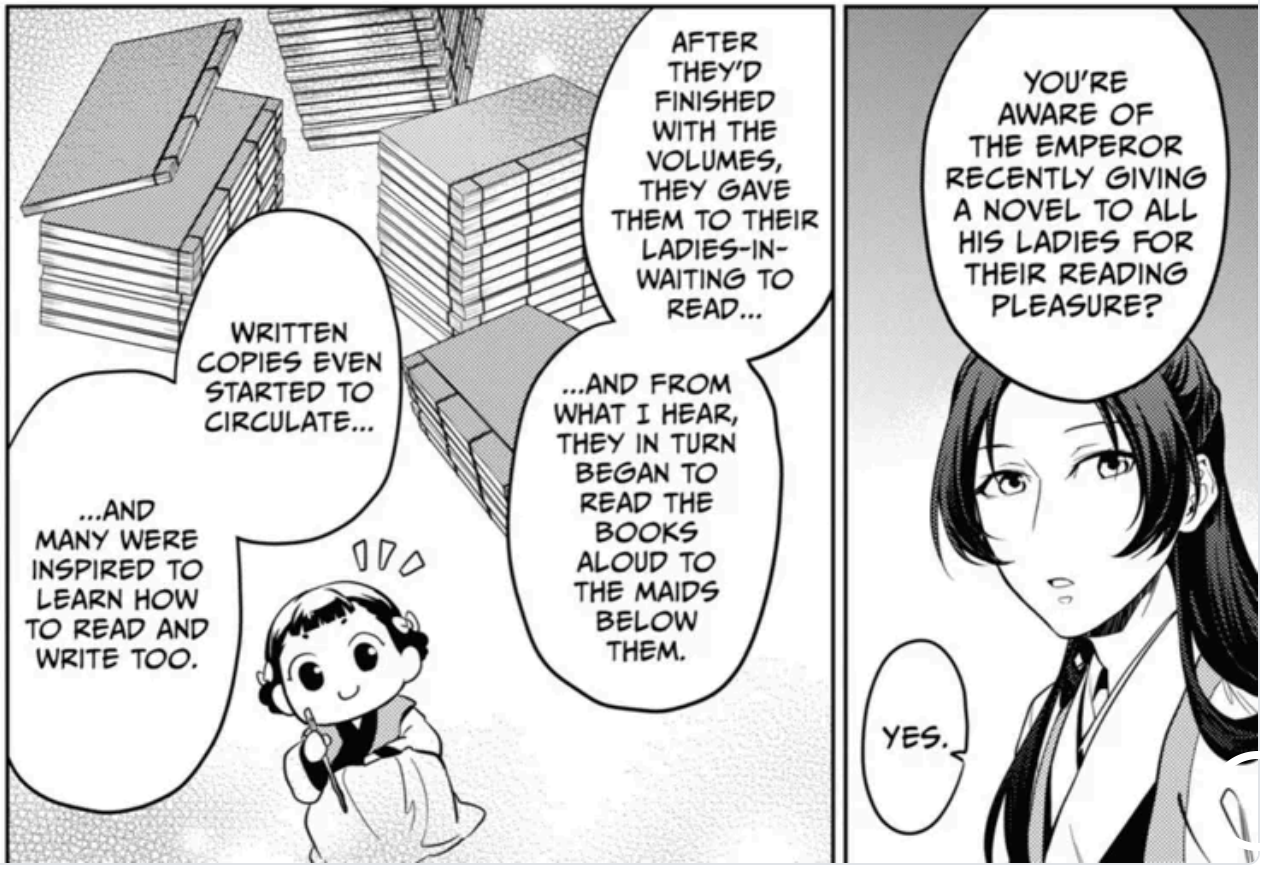
SAY NOTHING OF THE SORT! IT WOULDN'T DO FOR ME TO OVERSTAY MY WELCOME.
I DON'T SEE WHAT HARM THERE IS...
...IN YOU TWO TALKING HERE.
POUT

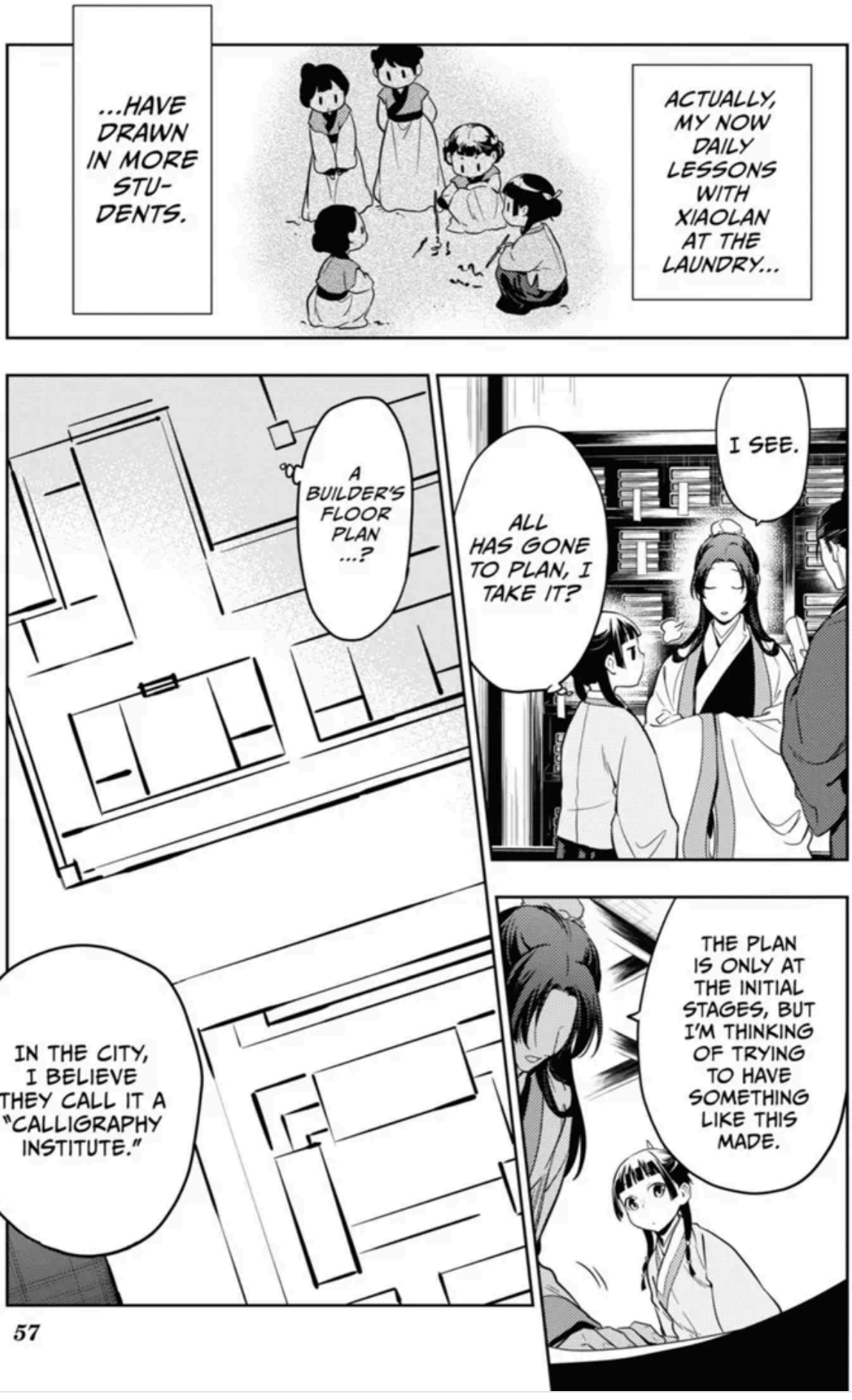
PLEASE LEAVE THESE TWO TO IT, CONSORT GYOKUYO.
OH DEAR.
IT MUST BE TIME FOR HER PRE-NAP FEED...
THE PRINCESS HAS BEGUN TO SQUALL.
WAAH!
WAAAAH!
IN ANY CASE, I THINK YOU'RE NEEDED ELSE-WHERE, MY LADY.

...SHE'S STILL BRIMMING WITH THE CURIOS-ITY OF YOUTH.
WHILE HER LOOKS AND PERSON-ALITY MAKE HER SEEM MORE MATURE THAN HER YEARS...
...BUT SHE'S JUST A YOUNG WOMAN OF 20.
THE CONSORT MAY BE PREGNANT WITH HER SECOND CHILD...

AND SO...
...WE TOOK OURSELVES OFF TO THE HEAD EUNUCH'S CHAMBERS, THE PLACE WE GO WHENEVER THERE'S SOMETHING TO DISCUSS THAT JINSHI DOESN'T WANT THE CONSORT PRIVY TO.
SINCE HE SENT EVERYONE AWAY, I DOUBT THERE'LL BE TEA.
IT'D BE BETTER IF THEY MADE A ROOM AT THE PHYSICIAN'S JUST FOR THIS.
AT LEAST THEN THE QUACK WOULD BRING US TEA AND SNACKS WHENEVER HE FELT LIKE IT.

SO WHAT WAS IT YOU WISHED TO DISCUSS?


YOU'RE AWARE OF THE EMPEROR RECENTLY GIVING A NOVEL TO ALL HIS LADIES FOR THEIR READING PLEASURE?
YES.
AFTER THEY'D FINISHED WITH THE VOLUMES, THEY GAVE THEM TO THEIR LADIES-IN-WAITING TO READ...
...AND FROM WHAT I HEAR, THEY IN TURN BEGAN TO READ THE BOOKS ALOUD TO THE MAIDS BELOW THEM.
WRITTEN COPIES EVEN STARTED TO CIRCULATE...
...AND MANY WERE INSPIRED TO LEARN HOW TO READ AND WRITE TOO.


...HAVE DRAWN IN MORE STU-DENTS.
ACTUALLY, MY NOW DAILY LESSONS WITH XIAOLAN AT THE LAUNDRY...
A BUILDER'S FLOOR PLAN ...?
I SEE.
ALL HAS GONE TO PLAN, I TAKE IT?
IN THE CITY, I BELIEVE THEY CALL IT A "CALLIGRAPHY INSTITUTE."
THE PLAN IS ONLY AT THE INITIAL STAGES, BUT I'M THINKING OF TRYING TO HAVE SOMETHING LIKE THIS MADE.
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SO IN OTHER WORDS, A SCHOOL.
OOH!
I HAD A FEELING THAT'S WHERE HE WAS GOING WITH THIS...
...BUT I ADMIRE HOW QUICKLY HE'S MAKING IT ALL COME TOGETHER.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR USUAL COLD GAZE?!
ARE YOU UNWELL, XIAOMAO?
OH, I DON'T KNOW. IT'S NOTHING. I JUST FEEL SO RESTLESS NOW.
SHUDDER
ぞおっ
WHAT KIND OF REACTION IS THAT?
HERE I WAS, FEELING UNUSUALLY IMPRESSED FOR ONCE...
PHEW!
HE REALLY IS A DYED-IN-THE-WOOL MASOCHIST.
じいっ
GLARE
...SO WHAT DO YOU THINK?

HE'S TOO WELL-BRED AND NAIVE TO MAKE OUT THE FINAL HURDLES.
AND HE MUST KNOW THAT, OTHERWISE HE WOULDN'T BE ASKING ME FOR MY OPINION.
IN CONCEPT, AT ANY RATE.
THE WOMEN WILL LEARN SKILLS THAT WILL COME IN HANDY EVEN AFTER THEY COMPLETE THEIR TERM OF SER-VICE...
...SO I THINK IT'S A GREAT IDEA.
AND OF THOSE WHO MERELY FEIGN A GRACIOUS ATTITUDE...
...SOME MAY EVEN HAVE THEIR SERVANTS HANG AROUND AND HARASS THE STUDENTS.
I CANNOT SPEAK TO THEM ALL, BUT MANY AMONG THEM ARE PROUD AND HAUGHTY...
...SO THEY MAY NOT BE BEST PLEASED AT THE IDEA OF LOWLY, ILLITERATE MAIDS...
...COMING TOGETHER TO LEARN TO NEW THINGS.
WHILE THE OPEN SPACE ON THE SOUTH SIDE THAT YOU'VE EARMARKED FOR THE BUILDING WILL BE CONVENIENT FOR BRINGING IN MATERIALS AND SUCH...
...IT'S ALSO BY THE MAIN GATE AND IS A PRIME LOCATION FOR CONSORTS OF THE UPPER AND MIDDLE RANKS TO ASSEMBLE.
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YES.
...PERHAPS I SHOULD BUILD IT IN THE NORTH INSTEAD.
CAN TOTALLY SEE THAT HAPPENING...
YOU'LL PULL IN MORE ATTENDEES IF THEY KNOW IT WILL HELP THEM MAKE A LIVING LATER.
...WHY NOT MAKE IT SOUND AS IF YOU'RE INVITING THE MAIDS TO DO VOCATIONAL TRAINING?
AND INSTEAD OF PRESENTING IT AS A SCHOOL...
MM-HMM.
MM-HMM.
ALSO, I DON'T THINK A SPECIAL LOCATION IS NECESSARY FOR THIS.
RENOVATING ONE OF THE MANY BUILDINGS ALREADY THERE WOULD DO JUST FINE.
AWW, NO SNACKS TODAY...
YES
IF THEY'RE UNSURE WHEN SNACKS ARE ON OFFER, THEY'LL COME EVERY DAY TO AVOID MISSING THEM.
FROM TIME TO TIME ONLY?
YAAAY!
I SUGGEST YOU OFFER SNACKS FROM TIME TO TIME TOO.

THIS IS ALL SIMPLY MY PERSONAL OPINION, THOUGH.
IT SHOULD AT LEAST GIVE YOU SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT.
THERE ARE SOME OTHER SUGGES-TIONS I COULD MAKE...
...BUT IT WOULD BE IMPRUDENT FOR HIM TO ACCEPT EVERYTHING I SAY WITHOUT QUESTION, SO I'LL LEAVE IT THERE.

THERE IS ONE OTHER THING I'D LIKE TO DISCUSS.

VERY WELL, THEN.

BUT WAS THIS TOPIC...
?
...REALLY DESERVING OF THE PURPOSEFUL CHANGE IN LOCATION?

DO YOU KNOW MUCH ABOUT MUSHROOMS?
MANY MUSH-ROOMS ARE POISONOUS...
...BUT THEY CAN ALSO HAVE GREAT MEDICINAL VALUE.
WHAT IS IT YOU WISH TO KNOW?
THEY CAN BE USED IN BOTH FOOD AND MEDICINAL PREPARA-TIONS...
...SO I HEAD INTO THE MOUNTAINS A FEW TIMES A YEAR TO FORAGE FOR THEM.
EVERY YEAR, WHEN THE WEATHER GROWS WARM...
...LADIES OF THE COURT HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO IGNORE OUR WARNINGS AND GET FOOD POISONING BY EATING THEM.

ALSO, IT SEEMS FRUIT REGULARLY GOES MISSING FROM THE ORCHARDS.
WE EVEN HAD SOMEONE SAMPLING THEM WITH THE PHYSICIAN IN HIS OFFICE LAST YEAR.
...THIS ALL SOUNDS FAMILIAR ...
OH?!
WELL, ONE CAN FIND GLUTTONS IN EVERY WALK OF LIFE.
AS YOU SAY.
AS FOR THE ORCHARDS, I SIMPLY THINNED OUT SOME OF THE FRUIT FOR A BETTER HARVEST.
YUM! YUM!
THOSE MUSHROOMS WEREN'T POISONOUS.
...BEFORE ANY COURT LADIES CAN BE ENTICED INTO MAKING THE MISTAKE OF EATING THEM.
...I WOULD LIKE YOU TO SEARCH OUT AND DISPOSE OF ANYTHING POISONOUS IF POSSIBLE...
SO THAT'S WHY...

AND IN THE EVENT THAT YOU DO COME ACROSS SOMETHING TOXIC, I WISH TO BE INFORMED OF WHAT KIND OF POISONS THEY MIGHT BE.
TASTING THE CONSORT'S MEALS ASIDE, YOU'LL TAKE LEAVE FROM YOUR DUTIES AT THE JADE PALACE FOR THE DURATION OF THIS JOB.
VERY WELL, SIR.
BETTER YET, IF THIS INVESTI-GATION IS TO OCCUPY ALL MY TIME...
...I THINK IT WOULD HAVE BEEN FASTER TO EXPLAIN IT TO BOTH ME AND MY LADY AT ONCE.
I GET THE SENSE THERE'S SOME-THING MORE AT PLAY HERE...
YET ANOTHER TOPIC SUITABLE FOR CONSORT GYOKUYO'S EARS...
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HERE'S A MAP.
MERRY
MERRY
...BUT I'M NOT SO DUMB AS TO INTERRUPT SUCH A TANTALIZING REQUEST WITH MY QUERIES.

EVEN AT THE INNER COURT, THERE ARE DESIGNATED PLACES FOR ADMIRING FLOWERS AND TREES.
THERE ARE ALSO ORCHARDS AND PINE THICKETS.
NOW THAT THE WEATHER IS TURNING UNPLEASANTLY WARM AND HUMID...
...I'M SURE THERE'LL BE ALL KINDS OF MUSHROOMS POPPING UP!
SO WHERE DO WE START?

I DOUBT I'LL SPOT ANY MOONLIGHT MUSHROOMS HERE AT THE INNER COURT.
OYSTER AND MOONLIGHT MUSHROOMS ARE ESPECIALLY HARD TO DISTINGUISH.
...MOONLIGHT MUSHROOMS ARE MORE COMMONLY FOUND IN THE MOUNTAINS.
BUT WHILE OYSTER MUSHROOMS GROW JUST ABOUT ANY-WHERE...
THE PROB-LEM WITH MUSH-ROOMS ...
...IS THAT IT'S HARD TO TELL APART THE EDIBLE ONES FROM THE ONES THAT CAN KILL YOU.
EVEN BACK IN THE PLEASURE DISTRICT, THERE WERE SEVERAL CASES OF WOMEN GETTING FOOD POISONING FROM EATING MUSHROOMS THEY'D BEEN GIVEN AS GIFTS BY THEIR PATRONS.
...OR TO THE SOUTHERN SIDE, WHERE THE PALACES OF THE HIGHER-RANKING CONSORTS AND THE BUILDINGS THEY FREQUENT ARE LOCATED.
...SHE WOULDN'T GO SOME-WHERE THE GARDENERS OFTEN TEND...
IF A WOMAN OF THE COURT WAS LOOKING TO PICK MUSHROOMS ON THE SLY...
...SO I GUESS I'LL SLOWLY MAKE MY WAY THERE.
BY CONTRAST, THERE ARE A LOT OF RUN-DOWN STRUC-TURES TO THE NORTH...

HM?
WHAT'S THIS SMELL?
うん
WAFT
NOT BODY ODOR... SOMETHING ODD...
スン SNIFF
スーン SNIFF
...OOH.
MAYBE THIS IS THE PLACE WITH THE STRANGE SMELL THAT SHISUI WAS TALKING ABOUT.
PERHAPS THE LEAKED SEWAGE IS NOURISHING THE MUSHROOMS...
...AND MAKING IT EASY FOR THEM TO GROW HERE.
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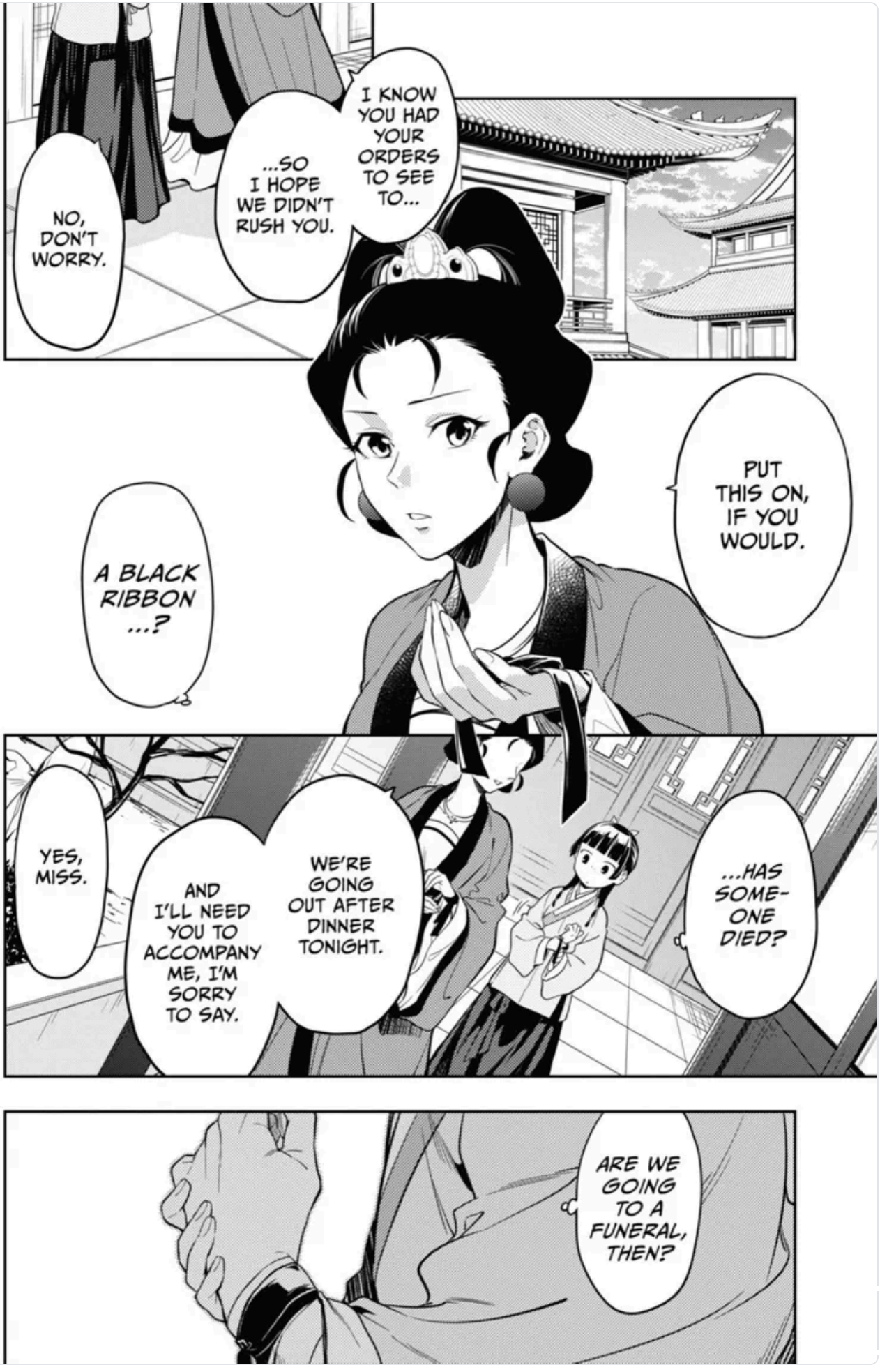
I HAVE RETURNED!
I FOUND SOME THAT COULD BE USED IN MEDICINES TOO.
WHAT AN INCREDIBLY PRODUC-TIVE DAY!
I LEFT THE FORAGED MUSH-ROOMS WITH THE QUACK FOR THE TIME BEING.
THESE ARE ALL POISONOUS, SO PLEASE DON'T EAT THEM, OKAY?
IT'S NEARLY DINNER, SO GO CHANGE AND GET CLEANED UP.
OKAY.
...IS IT JUST ME, OR DO YOU SMELL BAD TOO?
PAT
PAT
...I MUST'VE PICKED UP THAT ODD STENCH.
DON'T JUST STROLL IN HERE ALL FILTHY LIKE THAT!
WHOA! HEY!
OH! WEL-COME BACK!
FILTHY, HUH...


NO, DON'T WORRY.
...SO I HOPE WE DIDN'T RUSH YOU.
I KNOW YOU HAD YOUR ORDERS TO SEE TO...
PUT THIS ON, IF YOU WOULD.
A BLACK RIBBON ...?
YES, MISS.
AND I'LL NEED YOU TO ACCOMPANY ME, I'M SORRY TO SAY.
WE'RE GOING OUT AFTER DINNER TONIGHT.
...HAS SOME-ONE DIED?
ARE WE GOING TO A FUNERAL, THEN?

SO I GUESS WE'RE SUPPOSED TO TAKE A FLOWER FOR OFFERING FROM THOSE LADIES-IN-WAITING...
OH?

THAT'S AWFULLY RED AND SWOLLEN FOR A RASH.
THAT SCAR REMINDS ME OF...
THE DECEASED WAS THE UPPERMOST OF THE MID-RANKING CONSORTS AND THE DAUGHTER OF A DIGNITARY.
LADY JIN.
THEY SAY SHE FELL ILL ABOUT A YEAR AGO AND NEVER LEFT HER ROOMS.
IT SEEMS FOOD POISON-ING IS WHAT DID HER IN.

I'M SUR-PRISED ...
...TO HEAR YOU GO SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT.
HIS MAJESTY NEVER ONCE CALLED ON HER. SURELY ALL SHE HAD TO DO WAS SAY THE WORD, AND SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO RETURN HOME.
.....
OH...

GLANCE
ちら
...CONSORT GYOKUYO HAD ALREADY BEEN POISONED ONCE BEFORE YOUR ARRIVAL.
WE SUSPECT LADY JIN MIGHT HAVE BEEN BEHIND IT...
WHSPR
IT MAKES SENSE NOW.
HM ...?
IF ANYTHING, THIS SITUATION ONLY BRINGS HER RELIEF.
OF COURSE HONGNIANG WOULDN'T MOURN SOMEONE WHO MIGHT'VE HARMED HER MISTRESS.
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CONSORT GYOKUYO, WHOSE LIFE MAY HAVE BEEN TARGETED BY LADY JIN...
...IS NOW HEAVILY PREG-NANT, AND AS SUCH...
...SHE AND HER WOMEN MUST BE EVEN WARIER THAN USUAL OF THE OTHER CONSORTS AND COURT LADIES.
I CAN'T SAY WITH CERTAINTY THAT LADY GYOKUYO ...
...WHO WAS ALREADY ON GUARD AGAINST LADY JIN, DIDN'T POISON HER.
AND WHAT IF LADY JIN HAD DIED FROM INGESTING POISONOUS MUSH-ROOMS?
NO WONDER THEN THAT JINSHI WAS SO ADAMANT ABOUT ASKING ME IN PRIVATE TO IDENTIFY AND COLLECT THE POISON MUSHROOMS.
IF HER LADIES KNEW THAT THEIR CONSORT WAS UNDER SUSPICION...
...THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD HIM WOULD CHANGE...
...NO MATTER HOW PRETTY A EUNUCH HE IS.

I DOUBT SHE HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT, THOUGH.
OF ALL THE WAYS TO FINISH A PERSON OFF, POISONING TAKES TIME AND EFFORT, AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF BEING DISCOVERED IS HIGH.
AND THE LADIES OF THE JADE PALACE ...
...SIMPLY AREN'T CUT OUT FOR THAT KIND OF TREACHERY.
I DID THINK JINSHI WAS PLAYING FAVORITES A LITTLE TOO OPENLY WITH CONSORT GYOKUYO...
...BUT IT LOOKS LIKE HE WAS BEING IMPARTIAL, AFTER ALL.
BUT OF COURSE, I DIDN'T DO IT.
IF ANYONE WAS, IT'D HAVE TO BE ME.
I WONDER WHAT EXACTLY LADY JIN WAS POISONED WITH.
...BUT I DOUBT JINSHI WILL TELL ME.
IF JINSHI WAS TRYING TO GAUGE MY REACTION TO THE POISON MUSHROOM JOB OUT OF SUSPICION...
...I HAVE TO SAY I'M RATHER PROUD OF HIM AND NOT AT ALL DISAPPOINTED.
76

CLANG
STOP THAT!
ST—
FWAP

HA!!
SFWIP
GRRK

MURMUR
EEK!
MURMUR
HER FACE ...!
YOU FINALLY GOT WHAT'S COMING TO YOU!
NOW YOU'RE MUCH...
... MUUUCH UGLIER THAN ME!
THOSE SCARS —!!